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The “I” has taken over from the “we” omnipresent until the late 1970s

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# Subjective Writing in Contemporary Chinese Literature

The “I” has taken over from the “we” omnipresent until the late 1970s

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Translated from the French original by Peter Brown

- 1 In twentieth century Chinese literature, we find writers expressing several forms of subjectivity characterised as “ziwo” (I), “xiaowo” (small I), “dawo” (capital I), “wangwo” (I to be forgotten), as well as “wuwo” (no I). The “capital I” and the “I to be forgotten” are characteristic of the “art for life” school of authors, which had its zenith in the 1950s and 1960s. The “ziwo” and “xiaowo” are both expressions of the “art for art’s sake” and the “ziwo de zhutixing” (the subjectivity of the I), movements of the late 1970s. The purpose of the present article is to analyse this subjective writing that underlies Chinese literary modernity—a problematic that has been little explored<sup>1</sup>.
- 2 To this end, we have considered a number of issues in contemporary Chinese literature (1978-2004): for example, what caused the move from historical narrative to a narrative of the self, and what were the stages and mediations that enabled this? We also discuss the question of whether the subject is the only vector in play here and what its status is. Finally, we examine the role of poetic language.
- 3 The evolution of twentieth century Chinese literature draws upon two sources: on the one hand, Chinese culture—in particular the ritual literature of former times—, and the radical and revolutionary West on the other. Subjectivity emerges in Chinese literature in the early part of the twentieth century, as a result of its encounter with the West. That is why, before setting out four figures of subjectivity in contemporary literature, we offer an overview of the heritage from the first part of the century. From 1917 to 1960, the individual voice of the subject was gradually drowned in a national chant. From writer to eulogist (1917-1960)

- 4 Until the late 1970s, Chinese literature was dominated by a single voice—the *we*. This voice sang of a utopian world. In this “new world”, the *we* was the sole and omnipresent pronoun. All extraneous elements had to be replaced, and all individual lives were brought into line with the collective norm. All subjects had to be converted to the state and its ideology to achieve the “ideal world”. The past is regarded as an obstacle and a reactionary element. In this sense, the “new world” of the twentieth century was revolutionary and opposed to tradition.
- 5 Let us quote from a passage in Tzvetan Todorov’s *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien* (Memory of Evil. Temptation of Good):
 

“Violence as a means of imposing good is not intrinsically related to scientific method, since it has existed from time immemorial. The French Revolution had no need of any scientific justification to legitimise the Terror. However, from a particular time onward, several factors that had hitherto been separate came together: the revolutionary spirit, involving recourse to violence; the millenarian dream of building a paradise on earth here and now; finally, the doctrine of science, postulating that complete knowledge of the human race was nigh. That moment corresponded to the birth of a totalitarian ideology”<sup>2</sup>.
- 6 The revolutionary spirit, the millenarian dream and the scientific doctrine were imported into China during the “New Culture Movement” that got under way in 1917 with great expectations of the West. Its militants introduced a spirit of revolution in order to destroy the old world and tradition and above all the former language. They introduced the utopian idea of an earthly paradise where everyone would be equal. They introduced the scientific approach in the hope of saving China and transforming and educating it thanks to scientific knowledge. The absolute reason of Descartes and the scientific spirit of the Enlightenment thinkers were to exert an influence on literature.
- 7 The history of the “New Chinese Literature” launched by the “New Culture Movement” is made up of two main elements: the one being a search for an individual *I*, affirming its subjectivity, and the other the aspiration of the *we* to fashion “the new human beings” (*suzao xinren*) at all costs. In this sense, the *I* of the New Chinese Literature is a strange mix in which subjectivity and the collective consciousness cohabit, producing a permanent tension between the individual *I* and the collective *we*.
- 8 In May 1918, the journal *Xin Qingnian* (New Youth) published a short story called *Kuangren riji* (Diary of a Madman, 1918) by Lu Xun (1881-1936). The narrative is considered to be the first manifestation of the *I*; it caused a stir in intellectual and literary circles. It was the first time in Chinese literary history—not, however, devoid from “note novels” (*biji xiaoshuo*) written in classical Chinese—that a work of fiction was published in the form of a diary (*rijiti xiaoshuo*). With respect to the novel by Chen Hengzhe *One Day*, published by the *Weekly Newspaper of Chinese Students in the USA* in June 1917, written in *baihua* (Modern Chinese). The *Dairy of a Madman* was infinitely more revolutionary, taking on traditional society and those who “eat” human beings.
- 9 From the 1920s to the 1940s, subjectivity gradually retreated, as writing came into the service of the national, collective memory. The literary revolution of 1917 had tapped into foreign literatures; from the 1940s on, Chinese literature turned to Soviet literature for much of its inspiration. The *I* was no longer the central concern of writing. Not only did subjectivity have to come under the sway of the figure of the collective consciousness, but also to become completely dissolved in the collective chant. This dissolution of the self was not realised solely due to official orders from

above. For many writers, even those who were held to be modernists, it was rather a matter of a perfectly personal choice. Thus, in his poem *Zangge* (Funeral Dirge)<sup>3</sup>, the poet Mu Dan enthusiastically said goodbye to the small, personal *I* becoming a big *I*.

- 10 Giving up the personal self, its depth and its torments, was tantamount to a new attachment to the transparency of the collective chant. The individual's quest was thus no longer possible, even becoming an obstacle to the collective chant.

Lu Xun's *Diary of Madman*, published in 1918, is considered the earliest manifestation of "I" literature



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- 11 This attachment to the *we* must not merely be regarded as an ideological fact. There may be something more fundamental to it. It was about a return to narrative art and the poetry of Antiquity. Literature reverted to the ancient poetic systems in which transparency showed itself to be indispensable to the collective song where poets were eulogists. The important thing was to take part in the rituals of social movements and to express this communion in poems, songs and dances. Literature constituted an absolutely central plank of social life and utopian activities.
- 12 Any extraneous element was necessarily doomed to exclusion. The *I* became collective. Far from entering into a dialogue with the "interior reader", the monologue took on the features of an open communication with the external readers. The autonomous narrative was reduced to the pure and simple recording of events. The text in which writing had no other end than itself was turned into a machine for churning out the new revolutionary tales. The writing of the self was no longer a break with society, but on the contrary the full and complete acceptance of the social contract.
- 13 Poetry in the form of a popular song or epic represented the principal literary trend in the 1950s. Production was extremely prolific. In particular, there was a series of

ritualistic-type odes singing the praises of the “new era”. Among these epic poems, we should mention *Shijian kaishile* (Time Begins, 1949) by Hu Feng (1902-1985), *Fangsheng gechang* (Let’s Sing Aloud, 1956) by He Jingzhi, and *Touru huore de douzheng—Zhi qingnian gongmin* (Springing Headlong into an All-out Struggle-To Young Citizens, 1955) by Guo Xiaochuan (1919-1976).

The cult of the hero

- 14 Poetry is the space par excellence of ritual. Its practitioners who mastered ritual language and showed themselves as the guarantors of orthodoxy were Mao Zedong and the people’s heroes. In a quasi-cosmic style, Hu Feng sang of the statuesque power whose vigilance could not really be questioned and whose ire one could not easily run the risk of provoking:

“The sea/ seething/ Rises up to the highest peaks/ Mao Zedong/ Unshakeable, he stands tall on the highest summit/ His body seems to be leaning just slightly/ His right hand seems to be shaking his fist/ Thrusting it forward/ He seems to be placing his feet/ On a huge invisible rudder/ He seems to fix his gaze/ On all the great and small rivers that flow right up to here”<sup>4</sup>.

- 15 Even if they do not put themselves above the common herd of men, the heroes of the people say things in circumstances and in ways that demonstrate their greatness. The statue endowed with life Trotsky’s 1923 saying in *Literature and Revolution* that “art is always a historically useful social servant”. Giving a proper name to someone is straight away to assign a future to that person. Let us mention in this connection poems such as *Lei Feng zhi ge*, 1963 (Lei Feng’s Ode, 1963) by He Jingle, *Bai de zange* (Ode on White Snow, 1957) and *Yige he bage* (One Plus Eight, 1957) by Guo Xiaochuan.

The popular song as a figure of the collective

- 16 On April 14th 1958, the *People’s Daily* published an editorial with the heading “Collecting Popular Songs on a Grand Scale” (*Da guimo de shouji quanguo minge*). Poetic creation was described there as being one with the movement of the Great Leap Forward (1958). A number of figures were quoted in support of this:

“In Sichuan province, people have managed, in less than two months, to muster a great artistic army of 22,000 writers. In Jiangsu province, more than 5,000 poetry clubs came into existence in the month of July; in Hubei province, more than 24,000 popular groups of artistic creation sprang up in the month of November. The district of Hongan alone has 577 teams of popular singers. According to the *New China Daily*, in Jiangsu province, ten million literary works have been produced in less than six months; in Shanghai, artistic teams have brought together 700,000 people who have written some 1,500,000 works”<sup>5</sup>.

- 17 The popular song was produced by practitioners for whom the epic was the supreme form. Sung at shows all over the country, epic poetry aimed to make the commonplace ecstatic and to sublimate the mundane. In these songs, there subsists, as if a residue of the hypnotic and magical power that is an integral part of traditional theatre where, in days gone by, in out of the way places, the spectator gave a beating on the way out to the actor who had played the role of the thief. The popular songs were presented as so many blank pages on which social events were written down as they occurred. The spectator was not passive, the world appeared to him as a field of action, where he was likely to be either transformed or eliminated. The words were heard and listened to in the present.

- 18 This meant that there was a huge choir in a grandiose spectacle from the tradition of poetic offerings to a divinity, but this time, it was to an ideological living entity that the offerings were made. Let us quote from one text from the period:

“In the district of Yu in Henan province, from November 4th-8th, more than 22 million literary works appeared in only five days. In the district of Changan in Shanxi province, more than 400,000 poems were composed within about twenty days; in the district of Suide, from October 1st-25th, more than one and a half million popular songs were published. In the mountainous region of Xuyong in Sichuan province, a single family of seven produced over 4,500 poems in a matter of months. The steel plant in the city of Wuhan put more than 500 poems on the wall provided for *dazibao*. In the Shanghai railway sector, 5,400 poems written by passengers were found in the public works documents between April and October”<sup>6</sup>.

- 19 Poetry was composed by and for the masses; it was the repository of the “memory of the masses” which, in the form of discourse, rejected all extraneous elements. This type of poetry was supposed to express the feelings of the whole society, be the bearer of a general affirmation and have writers and listeners, orators and public share in the one experience.

- 20 Henceforth, subjectivity had no place in writing. An oral culture replaced personal writing; popular songs took the place of poetry of the literate. This was a sort of poetic populism that turned radically away from the book as the space of subjectivity.

The collective challenge to nature

- 21 Another characteristic feature of Chinese poetry of the era of the Great Leap Forward was the aggressive attitude of the *we* with regard to Nature, which was diametrically opposed to the unconditional respect or even the submission to Nature that can be observed in the Chinese tradition. The arrogance and ambition to become “master and owner of Nature”, in Descartes’ words, take the place of deference and a certain awe. Here, the collective subjectivity that reduces the individual to nought seemed to have reached its apogee. This absolute faith in the superiority of humanity over Nature underpinned the project to build a utopia here on earth. Never did the *we* seem so sure of itself as at that time:

“As soon as we strike the ground with our foot/ The earth starts to quiver/ We let out our breath/ Impetuous, the rolling rivers give way/ We raise our hands/ The imposing mountains ice-over with fright/ As soon as we put our leg out/ No one can get in our way/ We are a people of workers/ Our strength knows no enemy”<sup>7</sup>.

- 22 From the 1950s until the end of the 1970s, the force of the dominant ideological discourse condemned to silence any individualistic streak in writing. Zong Pu (1928) with *Hongdou* (Red Bean, 1957), Yang Mo (1914) with *Qingchun zhige* (Song of Youth, 1958) and Ru Zhijuan (1925) with *Baihehua* (Lilly, 1958), all works that were very quickly labelled “petty bourgeois”, were among the rare writers of note.

The four figures of contemporary subjective writing

- 23 In the works of the past twenty years, the problematic of subjectivity has been at the core of writing. Some authors have got over the illusions of the absolute *I* and have again been exploring the exact place of subjectivity in writing. What we call subjective writing of the *I* corresponds to a cluster of works written after the Cultural Revolution, yet without excluding certain other works from before. The writers referred to below have been chosen because they bear witness to a particular sensibility, having introduced a subjective approach in their writings (*zhuti xiezu*).

- 24 Mu Dan (1918-1977) explores the living presence of his own self. The *I* here represents the empirical subject. In the opening lines of the *Funeral Dirge*, the *I* gives voice to its shadow:

“You are leaving us forever, my friend?/ My shadow grows dull/ my *I* of the past?/  
The sky is so blue, the sunlight so soft/ Rest in peace! Let me offer a sacrifice of  
joy!”<sup>8</sup>.

- 25 Mu Dan, whose *Shen mo zhi zheng* (Struggle between God and the Devil) dates from 1941, wrote *Shen de bianxing* (Metamorphosis of the Gods) in 1976, just before his death. Mu Dan’s poems fight in their way against the violence of the contemporary world and the absolute domination of science and the economy. The world is a place where violence is enacted upon the subject. For his part, Huang Xiang wrote *Duchang* (Song for Solo Voice) in the mid-1970s, and asks the fundamental question: “Who am I?” At the end of the 1970s, the young poet Bei Dao<sup>9</sup> (1949) was also engaged in a frantic search for the self.

- 26 It is difficult to determine who exactly initiated this change. Was it Huang Xiang, Guo Lusheng (1948), Bei Dao, Gu Cheng (1956-1993), Mang Ke (1950), Duo Duo (1951), Gao Xingjian, or Mu Dan? There is no doubt that Huang Xiang was one of the precursors. While the outside world was pulsating with a thousand voices in an enormous concert, Huang Xiang was turning towards his own inner self, striving to find there his reader who would be willing and able to hear him. In the process, Huang Xiang tried to invent a new form of life, one that no longer required an external reader and no longer depended on the world of spectators. First and foremost, he addresses himself; little does it matter whether his writings attract readers or not. Huang Xiang is an underground poet, radically different from the officially recognised. When he was starting out, he had no readership except perhaps for himself. He may have even refused to be read or perhaps no one felt the desire to listen to this voice that was so singular and strange. The fact remains that writing for him is something absolutely vital.

- 27 Huang Xiang ventures into territory where he sets up a dialogue with himself. He is the only reader in a position to guarantee himself an identity as a writer. We are clearly dealing here with a radical inversion of the relation between the written word and the author, between the text and the writer’s identity. Writing no longer stirs up patriotism, is no longer at the beck and call of such and such a political project: its aim is Man himself.

- 28 Shi Zhi (literally the “index finger”), the pseudonym of Guo Lusheng from the 1980s on, and Huang Xiang are both regarded as the first poets to have “woken up”<sup>10</sup>, who “beat a path to modernist poetry”<sup>11</sup>. Huang Xiang had a precocious literary career. In 1962, he wrote a poem entitled *Duchang* (Song for Solo Voice):

“Who am I?/ I am the solitary soul swirling down/ A poem/ of perpetual deviation/  
My wanderings and the sounds of my songs/ Are the floating traces of dream/ The  
only thing that listens to me/ Is the deep silence”<sup>12</sup>.

- 29 The subject is not the orator or the narrator of the authentic event. He lives off absolute solitude, having silence as his sole and unique reader. Poetic writing is here fundamentally a way of communicating with the self. As suggested by the title of the poem, this is a pure monologue. In the 1980s, the poems of Mu Dan and Huang Xiang found resonance in the world of Hai Zi (1964-1989). In fact, from the late 1970s until the present day, we can distinguish between four types of literary expression of the *I*.



First figure. The “I”, victim of history and inquisitor of its own soul

- 30 Beginning in 1978, the so-called “scar” (*shanghen wenxue*) and “reflective” (*fansi wenxue*) literatures marked the end of the era of the epic. Writers no longer hesitated about pointing out the absurdity and cruelty of society. The voice of the *I* resounded in 1980 in the novel *Ren a ren* (Oh man, man) by Dai Houying (1938-1996). *Lühuashu* (Mimosa, 1986)<sup>13</sup> by Zhang Xialiang (1936) was part of a series entitled “*Weiwu zhuyi qishilu*” (The Apocalypse of Materialists). The novel recounts the story of an intellectual from a bourgeois family who is labelled a “right winger” in 1957, and who, through hard labour, applies himself body and soul to turning himself into a “new man”. The main character is on a double mission, being both a convict of the earth and the inquisitor of his own soul. The subject spends his time in thought and self-reflection, in order to wrench from himself everything that could impede the birth of a new man. In this long meditation, there is not the slightest shadow of a doubt about the absurdity of the times. The whole story shows that it was a mistake to call the narrator “right wing”, something he is not at all. The victim of a misunderstanding, he nonetheless remains faithful to his mother country. The first novels written just after the Cultural Revolution constitute a “reflective or introspective literature” (*fansi wenxue*) that have two features in common: one is telling the story of a victim wrongly judged who looks into his/her soul; the other is seeking restitution for the wrong unjustly suffered. It is about the request of an individual in the face of political injustice.
- 31 In the same line, *Huozhe*<sup>14</sup> (*Vivre*, 1992), (Living, 1992) by Yu Hua (1960) comes across as an anti-utopian work. This novel of remarkable depth describes the compromises of the main character confronting the human condition that is always cruel. It depicts human beings who bear all of life’s sufferings and placidly accept their miserable fate. It is the terribly moving story of people, alive yet “dead”, who represent ideal citizens for the “new society”.
- 32 *Zhao maozi* (In Search of the Registration Number), by Jiang Zilong (1941), describes the absurdity of a situation from which the protagonist tries in vain to extricate himself over the course of twenty years. He relentlessly goes in search of his details in the national register of “rightists”. Yet, in spite of years of effort and of trying various steps, this rightist, who was the victim of a miscarriage of justice, finds no trace of his details needed for his rehabilitation. He remains condemned his whole life for want of this reference number. As such, the work recalls Kafka’s *Castle*.
- 33 The absurdity of the human condition is even more outrageous in *Zhang weiba de ren* (The Man with a Tail) by Wu Ruozeng. In 1957, the year of the launching of the anti-rightist campaign, the main character is eighteen years of age. One day, quite by chance, he notices that he has grown a tail. Humiliated, and feeling suddenly inferior to others, he lives with caution, so as not to attract attention or the slightest criticism. He thus spends thirty years under this unbearable psychological burden. One day, as fate would have it, he becomes a hero, bravely saving the life of a young woman with whom he then falls in love. But, in order to keep things absolutely clear-faced with such a noble and sublime love, the man reveals his secret to the young woman. She then finds a famous doctor to treat him. At the request of the doctor, the beloved pulls down his trousers, whereupon, to his great surprise, the doctor tells him that there is no tail to be found. Finally, he understands that the past thirty years lived in fear were nothing but a nightmare.



- 34 *Xue luo Huanghe jing wusheng* (Snow Falling on the Yellow River without the Slightest Sound) by Cong Weixi, also tells the moving story of the life of a rightist. Does this mean that the unendurable sufferings of the rightist characters come from the pressure of the outside world, and that the subject is just a simple victim without any responsibility in the face of history?
- 35 “The literature of introspection” was born with the novel *Jianji cuo le de gushi* (A Badly Staged Story, 1979), written by Ru Zhijuan (1925-1998). We could also mention *Buli* (Bolshevik Salvation, 1979)<sup>15</sup> and *Hudie* (The Butterfly, 1980)<sup>16</sup> by Wang Meng (1934), *Tianyunshan chuanqi* (The Extraordinary Story of the Mountain of Heavenly Clouds) by Lu Yanzhou and *Furong zhen* (A Town Called Hibiscus, 1981)<sup>17</sup> by Gu Hua. Faced with repression and convictions, the characters react in a terribly docile manner. They do their best to adapt to the regime, conform to the official line of thinking, and turn themselves into “new men”. Servitude is the primary condition for being a good subject, the motherland the fundamental principle to be respected, and the sacrifice of the self the cornerstone of the whole edifice.
- 36 “The literature of scars”, whose name comes from a short story, *Shanghen* (The Wound, 1978) by Lu Xinhua (1954), together with the “literature of introspection”, ushers in a new period. The works recount the sufferings of the Cultural Revolution. This literary strand also reveals the absurdity of the “ideal society”.
- 37 *Yi ge dongtian de tonghua* (A Winter’s Tale, 1980)<sup>18</sup> and *Chuntian de tonghua* (Tale of Spring, 1981) by Yu Luojin (1948) are two autobiographical novels that tell the story of an “educated young woman” and her comrades, suffering the pangs of love. *Banzhuren* (The Head Teacher, 1977) by Lu Xinwu (1942) is about the Cultural Revolution. This new writing presents a subjective view of the world. The works function according to a binary logic opposing good and evil: lights, victims and counter-revolutionaries on the one side; darkness, persecutors and revolutionaries on the other. They aim at dispelling any illusions of a utopian world.
- 38 Cong Weixi (1935) calls into question speculation about an earthly paradise. In his trilogy, *Taofan* (The Flight, 1995), the author criticises the submissive attitude of intellectuals facing the state and the weight of traditional culture. He writes as follows in his essay *Zouxiang hundun* (Heading Towards Chaos):

“Some sang, others wrote verse. In the primitive, bare prison cells, sometimes even a piece of music played on the Chinese guitar could be heard. Some of us, lovers of Peking opera, sang a few couplets *a capella*. Everyone was consumed with a desire to return home, and the same topic of conversation was on everyone’s lips. Could I get my job back? As I recall their behaviour, I have to say that I find Chinese intellectuals adorable, but even more so pitiful. They are adorable, as most of them do not complain about their lot, although they have served long sentences without really knowing why. They still have within them a heart that is entirely devoted to the cause of serving the State. They are pitiful, for it is precisely this spirit of Qu Yuan (340-278 B.C.), which limits their ability to have any real insight into society. Very often, they do not follow through with their thinking on the fine line between a daring feat and a crime; quite the contrary, they wallow in the feeling of disenchantment with their personal fate. What an illusion! How naive they are, these intellectuals, carried away by their own feelings! They are in a ‘vain dream’ of unilateral desire”<sup>19</sup>.

Second figure. The “I” refusing to be an accomplice of history

- 39 In a second figure of subjectivity, the *I* becomes another. The self-questioning of the *I* is turned into degradation in the work of Huang Xiang (*Birth*):

“Gradually, I let go/ I end up by/ Being discovered by the drifting clouds/I am but a mere/ Deserted hillock/ A limpid fountain/ Have you sensed me?/ I am rotting leaves, carrion and/ The smell of a vase/ A fossilised jelly fish/ A jackal/ Or a snake/ Tracing the curbed wake of Time”<sup>20</sup>.

- 40 The subject here becomes metamorphosed into non-human figures. The first line of verse, “Gradually, I let go” is circumstantial. It is no longer about the social subject. This letting go announces a fragmented *I*. These figures are not only presented in the form of physical discomfort, but they unfold especially as “a consciousness of the desperate negation”<sup>21</sup> of the *I*.

- 41 The poet Duo Duo<sup>22</sup> dates each and every one of his poems. The flow of time is thus indicated in the writing. It is clear that the temporal references have a meaning. Duo Duo’s poems do not reflect events; rather, they constitute a time that is particular to the viewing subject, a time that mixes the past, the present moment and the immediate future. For him, the past is now:

“The tide of blood of a social class has run its course/ The archer of the class fires his arrow once more/ This emptiness in the sky indifferent space devoid of inspiration/ This dream of old China shrouded in obscure ghosts/ When this moon affected by the greyness of ashes/ Rises on the horizon of devastated history/ In the midst of this guttered city, lacquer dark/ The sound and the imperious and brief flappings of the red terror are again propagated (1974)”<sup>23</sup>.

- 42 There is a mixing of different temporalities in this poem. Duo Duo<sup>24</sup> has trouble detaching himself from the fantasy of the archer. Yi, the mythical hero whose arrow pierced the nine suns burning the cereals. He can “still” see this archer there, through the narrative of the *Huainanzi*, the ghost of an immemorial China. In a city that has been emptied of its inhabitants, where the objects and functions that comprise it can no longer manage to name it, the black intensifies the subversive red.

Third figure. The internalised “I”

- 43 In 1979, a woman writer, Zong Pu, published *Wo shi shei?* (Who am I?). The question is the expression of a new and endless process of self-doubt. The novel relates the absurdity of the human condition. A young woman, Wei Mi, returns with her husband from abroad, with the ambition of fully serving their motherland. But the Cultural Revolution has begun and, after being subjected to severe persecution, her husband commits suicide. Following this terrible blow, Wei Mi goes mad, becoming no more than an insect. However, it turns out that her awareness has never been so great as in this insect state. She is forever wondering who she is. The novel reveals a cruel truth: transforming human beings into new men finally reduces them to insects. It conveys a message that to let oneself be carried away by illusions could spell the end of humanity.

- 44 Here, we no longer see the desire for subjective affirmation that Huang Xiang expressed in his poem, nor the questioning of the soul striving to conform to an ideal and an ideology. We are touching on a fundamental problem, that of Man and the nature of Man. The greatest danger for Man is not nature, but Man himself. More exactly, it comes from his ambition to build an earthly paradise. Man has never before undertaken the implementation of a new world order on such a massive scale, nor has he ever been so seriously stripped of his right to be human.

- 45 Zong Pu denounces the risks encountered in removing everything extraneous and undefined from the realm of humanity. The individual thus represents a sort of elusive element, an unforeseeable risk for the state and the system. The latter represent an “empire of good” under construction, one where, without any hesitation, intellectuals become engaged as activists, whether or not they are in favour of this empire.
- 46 Subjective writing takes the form of a fragmentation of the subject. In Lin Bai’s work, full of parentheses, the *I* is in a state of decomposition. Zhai Yongming’s (1955) writing is “nocturnal”. The night allows her to have an experience of self-strangeness between light and darkness. Zhai Yongming began to publish in 1981. A long poem entitled *Nüren* (Woman, 1984) in twenty chapters is regarded as a feminist manifesto, in which the writer declares her own distinct subjectivity, her world forever being penetrated by night, the “consciousness of night”, the source of “feminine thought” (*nüxing sixiang*). For the female poet, poetry is the ultimate form of consciousness.
- 47 The chronological sequence of the works is revealing: a subjective writing appears and constitutes a phenomenon that is not only literary, but also cultural and social. The birth of the journal *Jintian* (Today) was a decisive stage in the process. Here we are dealing with the individual’s call for subjectivity against the totalitarian system of the *we*. The *I* refuses to let itself be submerged by the *we*, or be overwhelmed in an existence devoid of any individuality.

Fourth figure. The “I” and the “it”: double time—the present and memory

- 48 The manifesto of “The Poetic School of Students” caused a real revolution in literary circles. In June 1986, *Daxuesheng shibao* (Student Poetry Review), edited by a group of student poets opposed to the trends of the day, published a shattering text. It was a manifesto announcing the birth of a new school:

The Manifesto of “The Poetic School of Students”

At the end of 1984 and the start of 1985, at this precise moment! Right here in Chongqing! We declare:

A. “The Poetic School of Students” is launched purely as the sign of a trend. It is not defined.

B. Its exclusive objective is as follows: - crush - smash - destroy! It takes no responsibility whatsoever for rehabilitating the post-destruction situation.

C. Its whole charm lies precisely in its coarseness, violence, superficiality and nonsense. What it wishes to counter-attack is erudition and profundity. Indeed, it has only been in existence for eight months, although this is much longer than we had anticipated! As a bomb, all that it aspires to is this one single instant-boom! Even now, there are people who are recuperating bits of it, insulting, cursing and mocking it. That does not concern us! We are moving forward in our own way.

D. What it advocates as an artistic concept is:

a) anti-grandeur. In particular, it aims at the consciousness of human servitude. All these simple human beings—vagrants, servile labour, those excluded from school and idle—it subjects them all to its pen and puts them violently down on paper, by singing their praises or attacking them.

b) recasting language— symbolic images! It unleashes all it has to say, without attaching any importance to the metamorphosis of the language as such, it pursues only the harshness of its own language.

c) it couldn’t give a damn about structure; its attitude can be summarised in two words: cruel coldness! This coldness that sets the human body on fire! If it is about black humour, why not?<sup>25</sup>

- 49 The young poets of this school claimed to be radical revolutionaries. No question any more of respecting the poetic tradition or conventional language, they were going to

“recast” the language by blowing up everything that currently existed. Never before had subjectivity stamped itself in such a radical way.

- 50 Subjective affirmation in Yu Hua is more subtle. His novel *1986* relates a mental patient’s memories of the Cultural Revolution. It is about a crazy character, who refuses to delve into memory, refuses therefore to step into history and become its accomplice. He even refuses to tell the story. The narrative space is dismantled by a narrative of the non-narrative, by fragmented and disorganised babblings. This history teacher is tirelessly fighting against his own shadow, completely losing his mind in the process. With Gei Fei (1964), the *I* asserts itself, being formed in the memory of the past or, more precisely, by the narration of the memory of the past. Both these perspectives of the *I* in Yu Hua and Gei Fei converge at the same point: the self-reflective individual subject.
- 51 With Gao Xingjian<sup>26</sup>, the individual subject does not reject the past. It divides itself into three. The space of the novel in *The Mountain of the Soul* is composed of a three-headed *I*: the *he/it* of the past, the informal *you* of the narrative present and the *I/me* of direct speech. The narrative time and space are fragmented; at one time we are in the present, at another in an internal memory, at another again in historical memory. The transitions from the body to the soul, from narrative language to poetic or theatrical language, take place within this split self
- 52 With Lin Bai, the discourse of the *I* in parentheses is more a subjective movement (direct intervention of the *I* in the narration) than a mere rhythmic break in the narrative. The sentimental and passionate experiences undergone in the narrative by the self are a kind of ocean with swirling waves that risk drowning the subject. The parentheses enable the author to get directly into the narration (see *Zhiming de feixiang*)<sup>27</sup>. They introduce two temporal levels into the writing: internal time (in the historical narrative) and external time (outside of the historical narrative). In *Yigeren de zhanzheng*<sup>28</sup> (*The War of a Single Woman*), the narrator is omnipresent through its multiple incursions and interruptions. Preventing the reader from getting caught up in the story, flaunting the usual conventions, it breaks the illusion of the narrative. There are six paragraphs entirely in parentheses in this novel. It is about the rumblings of the self, a wavering of the *I* living between real and imagined memory, about the *I*’s explanation of its own behaviour, its wondering about beauty and strength, about a short, retrospective look over ten years and its reasons for writing<sup>29</sup>. This individual subject is transformed in the work of young poets into “each one” (*ge ren*), an individual wanting to set himself apart from others.
- 53 Let us quote a verse from a poem by Liang Xiaoming, one of the “New Generation” of poets (*Xinshengdai*), entitled *Geren* (Each One):
- “You and I, we each take a glass for each other/ We drink each other’s tea/ We smile at each other/ Let us nod our head in a distinctive way/ We are healthy in body/ Each one talks about each other’s business/ Each one peels each other’s orange/ Each one expresses their own opinion/ Everyone takes his or her own opinion away/ At the end/ We each take each other’s path”<sup>30</sup>.
- 54 The dual representation of the *I* and the *you* is a mutual avoidance; they are two parallel monologues. What this *I* and this *you* have in common is each one’s autonomy. In eleven lines of poetry there are eleven “*ge*” that in turn mean each one, individual, a single person, oneself, personal. This is a highly unusual pattern in contemporary Chinese poetic writing, to which can be added a certain banality of language. A second distinctive feature of the poem is the abandoning of the metaphors or metonymies that

are massively present among the poets of “the obscure school”<sup>31</sup>. The referential function of language is completely jettisoned. Writing here becomes the locus for a trivial display of the mundane without any poetic verve. It is through this linguistic banality that the poet tries to move away from epic writing. Finally, in this poem, the definition of the subject becomes questionable. Who is it? Is it a collective *we* composed of invisible figures of “each one”? This problematised subject announces the disappearance of subjectivity in the works of Yang Li or Liao Yiwu with the latter’s long poem *Jujiang* (The Great Craftsman)<sup>32</sup>.

- 55 This look at twentieth century literature shows an evolution in writing from the collective *we* towards subjectivity. We have shown how a writing of individual subjectivity had emerged, and how it is today moving towards its own absence. This evolution has taken place under the influence of the Western *I*, particularly that of the French Symbolists<sup>33</sup>. This *I* functions at one time under the individualised aspect of the “*xiaowo*” (small *I*), at another in the form of a socialised plurality of the “*dawo*” (capital *I*) merged “with the values of common morality”<sup>34</sup>. The *I* wavers between subjective extension, subordination to the community, romantic reaffirmation and absolute individualism right up to self-abandonment.

## NOTES

1. In Chinese: *Hongqi zazhi bianjibu wenyizu* (dir.), *Wenxue zhutixing lunzhengji* (Collection of documents on the controversy about subjectivity in literature), Peking, Hongqi chubanshe, 1986; Zhu Shoutong (dir.), *Zhongguo xiandai zhuyi wenxue shi* (History of Chinese literary modernism), 2 vols, Nanking, Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998. In Western languages: Fokkema D. W., *Literary Doctrine in China and Soviet Influence 1956-1960*, Mouton & Co, La Haye, 1965; Goldman, Merle (dir.), *Literary Dissent in Communist China*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1967; Lee Gregory B., *The Boy Who Catches Wasps, Selected Poems of Duo Duo*, Brookline, Mass., Zephyr Press, 2002; Martin Helmut, *Modern Chinese Writers’ Self-Portrayals*, New York, London, M.E. Sharpe, 1992; Rabut Isabelle, “A propos de quelques problématiques nouvelles dans la critique littéraire chinoise” (About some new problematics in Chinese literary criticism), in Jean-Jacques Gandini (dir.), *Où va la Chine? (Where is China going?)* Paris, Editions du Félin, 2000, pp. 140-162; Hegeln Robert E and Hessney Richard C (dir.), *Expression of Self in Chinese Literature*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985; Woesler Martin (dir.), *The Modern Chinese Literary Essay: Defining the Chinese Self in the Twentieth Century*, Bochum, Bochum University Press, 2000.
2. Tzvetan Todorov, *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien* (Memory of Evil. Temptation of Good), Paris, Robert Laffont, 2000, pp. 36-37.
3. Li Fang (ed.), *Mu Dan shi quanji* (The Complete Poetic Works of Mu Dan), Beijing, Zhongguo wenxue chubanshe, 1996, p. 289.
4. Hu Feng, *Shijian kaishile* (Times Begins), in Chen Sihe (ed.), *Zhongguo dangdaiwenxueshi jiaocheng* (Compendium to the History of Contemporary Chinese Literature), Shanghai, Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1999, p. 24.

5. Zhang Dehou, Zhang Fugui, Zhang Yaxin, *Zhongguo dangdai shige shilun* (On the History of Contemporary Chinese), Changchun, Jilin renmin chubanshe, 1999, p. 43.
6. Zhang Dehou *et al*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
7. Zhang Dehou *et al*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
8. Li Fang (dir.), *op. cit.*, p. 291.
9. Many poems, prose works and short stories have been translated into French, particularly by Chantal Chen, see: *Quatre poètes chinois* [Four Chinese Poets] (Beidao, Gu Cheng, Mang Ke, Yang Lian), with Annie Curien, Ulysse fin de siècle, 1991; *Vagues*, Arles, Philippe Picquier, 1994; *Au bord du ciel*, [On the Edge of the Sky] Belval, Circé, 1995; 13, *rue du bonheur*, [No. 13, Happiness Street] collection of short stories by Beidao, Circé, 1999; «Journal de mes déménagements », Autodafé, October 2000, pp. 81-89; *Le Ciel en fuite* (The Sky on the Run), Anthology of New Chinese Poetry, in collaboration with Martine Vallette-Hémery, Belval, Circé, 2004; Beidao, *Paysage au-dessus de zéro* (Landscape above zero), Belval, Circé, 2004.
10. Chen Sihe, *op. cit.*, p. 170.
11. Yang Jian, *Wenhua dagemingzhong de dixia wenxue* (Underground Literature during the Cultural Revolution), Peking, Zhaohua chubanshe, 1993, p. 87.
12. Xie Mian, Tang Xiaodu (eds), *Zai liming de tongjing zhong* (In the Bronze Mirror at Dawn), Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 1993, p. 1.
13. Translated into French, éditions de Pékin, collection Panda, 1986.
14. Translated by Yang Ping, Paris, Le Livre de poche, 1994.
15. Translated by Chantal Chen-Andro, Paris, Messidor, 1989.
16. *Zhongguo wenxue*, translated into French, éditions de Pékin, collection Panda, 1982.
17. Translated into French by Philipe Grangereau, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1987.
18. Translated into French by Huang San and Miguel Mandarès, Paris, Christian Bourgois, 1982.
19. Cong Weixi, *Zouxian hundun* (Heading Towards Chaos), Fengyun shidai chuban gongsi, 1989, pp. 253-254.
20. Poem by Huang Xiang, in Xie Mian, Tang Xiaodu (eds), *Zai liming de tongjing zhong*, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.
21. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Idiot de la famille*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972, p. 181.
22. The poetry of Duo Duo has been translated and studied principally by Gregory Lee, see: *Statements: The New Chinese Poetry of Duoduo*, London, Wellsweep Press, 1989; *Looking Out from Death: From the Cultural Revolution to Tiananmen Square* (with John Cayley), London, Bloomsbury, 1989; "Selected Translations of Duoduo" in *Interpoetics* Volume 1, No. 1 (Summer 1997) ; "Selected Poems of Duoduo"(II) in *Interpoetics* 2 (1997); *The Boy Who Catches Wasps, Selected Poems of Duo Duo*, Brookline, MA., Zephyr Press, 2002; see also the poems translated by G. Lee, in *Le Ciel en fuite*, (The Sky on the Run) Anthologie of New Chinese Poetry, Chantal Chen-Andro, Martine Vallette-Hémery (eds), Belval, Circé, 2004, pp. 152-163.
23. Duo Duo, *Wuti* (Untitled), in Xie Mian, Tang Xiaodu (ed.), *Zai liming de tongjing zhong*, *op. cit.*, p. 80.
24. For a more thorough study, see Gregory Lee, Chapter 5 : "Exile and the Potential of Modernism", in *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Trouble-makers-Lyricism, Nationalism, and Hybridity in China and Its Others*, London, Hurst & Company, 1996, pp. 128-148; cf. also *Reverie, Exile, and the Critique of Modern Life and Translator's Foreword*, in *The Boy Who Catches Wasps, Selected Poems of Duo Duo*, *op. cit.*, pp. i – xiii.

25. Xu Jingya, Meng Lang, Cao Changling, Lü Guipin (eds), *Zhongguo xiandai zhuyi shiqun daquan 1986-1988*, pp. 185-186.
26. Gao Xingjian's works have been translated into French since the 1980s, principal among which are: *Le Livre d'un homme seul*, [The Book of a Lonely Man] translated by Noël and Liliane Dutrait, La Tour-d'Aigues, éditions de l'Aube, 2000 (*Yige ren de shengjing*, 1999); *La Montagne de l'Ame*, (The Mountain of the Soul) translated by Noël and Liliane Dutrait, La Tour-d'Aigues, éditions de l'Aube, 1995 (*Ling shan*, 1990).
27. Lin Bai, *Zhiming de feixiang*, The Fatal Flight, Peking, Taihai chubanshe, 2001.
28. Lin Bai, *Yigeren de zhanzheng*, Nanking, Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1997.
29. Lin Bai, *ibid*, pages 146, 153, 155, 165, 173, 221.
30. Xie Mian and Tang Xiaodu (eds), *Yi meng wei ma-Xinshengdai shijuan* (The Dream as a Horse Poems from the New Generation), Peking, Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 1997, p. 109.
31. *Menglongshi*, the obscure school, is a poetic current that appeared in the late 1970s, with young poets like Bei Dao, Mang Ke, Shu Ting, Gu Cheng.... This school was at the origin of a controversy in 1979 because its writing was considered as too individual and obscure by the orthodox critic.
32. See Xie Mian, Tang Xiaodu (eds), *Yu siwang duicheng* (In Symmetry with Death), Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 1993, pp. 158-160.
33. Jin Siyan, *La Métamorphose des images des symbolistes français aux symbolistes chinois* (The Metamorphosis of Images from French to Chinese Symbolists), Bochum, Cathay, 1997.
34. Chantal Andro, Annie Curien, Cécile Sakai, *Tours et détours-Ecritures autobiographiques dans les littératures chinoise et japonaise au XXe siècle* (Tricks of the Trade-Autobiographical Writing in Chinese and Japanese Literature of the Twentieth Century), Paris, Université Denis-Diderot, p. 11.